

Arab pilot seeks bail as FBI asks for time

By Richard Alleyne

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THE Algerian pilot accused of training the September 11 hijackers will go to the High Court to seek release from custody after the American authorities failed to provide key evidence against him.

Despite FBI claims that Lotfi Raissi was the "lead instructor" in the attacks, it has failed to present any proof to the British courts in the two months since he was placed in custody facing extradition, it was claimed yesterday.

As a magistrate extended his stay in prison once more, his lawyers said they would seek bail at the High Court, describing his treatment as a "gross abuse of the court".

Hugo Keith, for Raissi, said: "His treatment at the hands of the US government has been nothing short of outrageous. They have palpably and openly failed to deliver any evidence. The twists and turns, and the way in which he has been kept in custody is a gross abuse of the court."

He added: "He was detained on the basis that evidence was forthcoming. That evidence has not been forthcoming. It is disgraceful."

Raissi was arrested with his wife Sonia, 25, and brother Mohammed, 29, at his flat in Colnbrook, near Slough, Bucks, on Sept 23. His wife, who works at Heathrow, and brother were later released.

The FBI, which is seeking extradition of Raissi, issued a warrant at an earlier hearing alleging that he twice lied in an application for a pilot's licence.

But the court was told that those were "holding charges", and that he could eventually face a charge of conspiracy to murder.

Arvinder Sambei, for the FBI, said Raissi was a member of a well-funded and organised group that was able to act swiftly. She said he was particularly responsible for the training of Hanni Hanjour, suspected of being the pilot of the airliner that hit the Pentagon.

It was alleged that he made frequent trips to America between June 10 and July 11 in order to make sure that the terrorists were "capable and trained" to carry out the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon.

She said there was video footage showing him and Hanjour together in Arizona during one of the trips. But yesterday, during his fourth appearance at Belmarsh magistrates' court in south-east London, it was disclosed that the man on the video was not Hanjour.

Paul Warner, prosecuting, said the American authorities were now saying that Raissi accompanied Hanjour on a training flight only once and they had not obtained a flying log to back up the claim.

He said the FBI was preparing a further 11 counts against Raissi, who came to Britain at the beginning of the year, although he had no details as to what they were.

He said the extradition case was continuing on the grounds that Raissi had falsified an application form to the US Federal Aviation Authority.

It is alleged that he failed to declare a conviction for theft in Britain in 1993 or that he had had surgery on his knee, an injury he has claimed he picked up playing tennis. The theft charge related to when Raissi was convicted of stealing a briefcase at an airport in 1993 and gave a false name on his arrest, Mr Warner said.

He said evidence had been obtained linking Raissi to another suspected terrorist, named Dahmani, who is in custody in Arizona. Mr Warner alleged that Raissi had helped Dahmani to falsify immigration papers for America.

Detectives searching the flat of another suspected terrorist, Amar Makhulif, 37, alleged to have plotted to blow up Los Angeles airport, found a phone number for Dahmani, the court was told.

District Judge Timothy Workman refused an application for bail despite a promised £10,000 surety, though he admitted that the evidence at present was "tenuous". He remanded Raissi in custody until Dec 14.

Makhulif and Mustapha Labsi, 32, accused of plotting to bomb the G7 summit in Lille five years ago, also appeared in court. Both were remanded in custody until Dec 14.

After the case Richard Egan, the solicitor for Raissi, said: "Today the US Government has revealed what we long suspected, that they no longer seek Raissi to return to the US on charges relating to the extraordinary events on September 11."

Referring to the refusal to grant bail, he added: "My client is extremely disappointed. We will be appealing this ruling."

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